

On the apparent status of Mottled Swift *Apus (Tachymarptis) aequatorialis* and Alpine Swift *A. (T.) melba* in Mali, West Africa

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Moreau (1972) doubted that Alpine Swift *Apus (Tachymarptis) melba* breeds in West Africa, but Thiollay (1974) reported thousands during mid June in Mali, between the Plateau Dogon and Hombori (15°10'N, 02°00'W), with signs that they were breeding. This is the only such report for the entire subcontinent. On the other hand, neither Thiollay nor Lamarche (1980) mentioned Mottled Swift *A. (T.) aequatorialis*, but in reporting some small groups of *A. aequatorialis* in February and June–August at sites in northern Burkina Faso (c.14°N, 02°40'W), near the frontier with Mali, Balança & de Visscher (1993) suggested that a breeding area might prove to be the Plateau Dogon in Mali. This was supported by the observations of Spierenburg (2000) from Teli, Bandiagara (c.14°21'N, 03°37'W), in October. During a short visit to the Dogon and the Douentza area (15°00'N, 02°57'W) in early March 2002 we did not see a single individual of either species. Intrigued as to the status of *A. melba* as a breeder, and by the possibility of *A. aequatorialis* nesting in Mali, we visited likely areas in 2004, in particular spending three days in mid June around cliffs and large rocky mountains in the Sahel.

MOTTLED SWIFT *Apus aequatorialis*

During more than one month in the Sudanian woodlands of southern Mali in 2004 we saw just one *A. aequatorialis*, near Madina Diassa (10°50'N, 07°44'W), on 23 May (possibly associated with a large rocky hill east of the Baoulé-sud, which was not visited). However, the species was very common (often hundreds together) in the Sahel from Douentza to Hombori, and north and east to the Mare de Gossi (15°48'N, 01°19'W), on 14–19 June. Groups were present around all large cliffs between Douentza and Hombori, and were feeding over or drinking at pools away from cliffs, when they could be observed at very close range. The degree of vocal activity and pairs chasing each other (often around rock faces) was indicative of breeding. Many were examined closely when drinking, and these clearly belonged to a pale race (either *lowei* or *furensis*), with an extensive white throat, trace of a breast-band and greyish-white scalloped belly.

The two forms concerned are *M. a. lowei* (type locality, Mahera, Rokelle River, Sierra Leone), which has an extensive and clearly defined white throat and central belly, separated by a brown band (Bannerman 1920), and the not dissimilar *A. a. furensis* (type locality, El Fasher, Sudan) (Lynes 1920). These races are noticeably different from the dark population '*bamendae*' of Cameroon, which lacks white on the lower breast and belly (Serle 1949). *Lowei* and *furensis* differ in the colour of their upperparts, *furensis* being 'smoky-brown' (Lynes 1920), lacking the contrasting saddle effect of *lowei* (C. H. Fry in Fry *et al.* 1988). These are subtle

differences, and we cannot say to which race our observations refer—on geographical grounds *lowei* would appear more likely. In Togo Walsh *et al.* (1990) observed up to 50 in February–March: ‘the extent of white on belly and throat suggested *A. a. lowei* but *A. a. furensis* cannot be excluded’. In Ghana numbers of *A. aequatorialis* were present in the Accra area with migrant European Swift *A. apus* and *A. melba* ahead of the Harmattan on 4 March, and ‘the Mottled Swifts were noticeably paler and the mottling more distinct than the local resident race’ (Grimes 1974). As far as we know, no specimens have been examined of the population breeding in southern Ghana, but birds watched very closely in mid May at Tumu in northern Ghana resembled *lowei* (Sutton 1970).

The calls of *A. aequatorialis* encountered in 2004 were a series of 8–10 high-pitched *kikikikiki* notes, delivered more slowly than in *A. melba*, rising then falling. We were able to compare the voices of the two species in eastern Ghana in February 2005, as they were feeding in mixed flocks. The calls are indeed very similar, produced in slightly slower series in *A. aequatorialis*. A recording of these vocalisations of *A. aequatorialis* has not been published; Chappuis (2000) merely re-used the tape of a brief dry call borrowed from Gibbon (1991). Although R. J. Stjernstedt is mentioned by Fry *et al.* (1988) as having taped the species, this is apparently not so (R. J. Stjernstedt *in litt.* 2004).

Breeding populations of *A. aequatorialis* in West Africa are not known with certainty from elsewhere, although the species was stated to be ‘nesting’ at Mahera in Sierra Leone (Lowe 1921), which is not one of the two better-known places of this name, but clearly Mabala, on the Rokelle River (see Lowe 1932), c.08°34’N, 12°47’W. Observed behaviour also suggests nesting at quarries on the Accra Plains, Ghana, 05°54’N, 00°08’W (Grimes 1987) and Wase Rock, Nigeria, 09°04’N, 09°56’E (Dunger 1965).

ALPINE SWIFT *Apus melba*

In contrast, we could find none of the huge numbers of *A. melba* reported as apparently breeding by Thiollay (1974) in the very same localities. With very few exceptions, the numerous reports of *A. melba* that we have traced from West Africa point to the species being no more than a non-breeding migrant from the Palearctic. For example, in Nigeria extreme dates are 7 November–21 May (Elgood *et al.* 1994), in Côte d’Ivoire the species is present October–April (Thiollay 1985) and in Liberia December–April (Gatter 1997). A Swiss-ringed bird was recovered in eastern Ghana on 22 January (Schifferli & Jacquat 1973). We saw several hundred in eastern Ghana in February 2005. The species is also especially numerous in Togo in late January–early March, sometimes in thousands (Walsh *et al.* 1990), to 17 May (Cheke 1982, not ‘Cheke 1980’ as in Cheke & Walsh 1996). However, there are also reports of a few ‘very grey birds’ seen in Togo as late as 3 June, and even to 1 July (Cheke & Walsh 1984), which possibly refer to wandering non-breeders.

Discussion

We believe breeding by *A. melba* in West Africa is at most exceptional, the reports of Thiollay (1974) being repeated by no other observer. On the other hand it is clear

there is a very substantial, hitherto unreported, breeding population of *A. aequatorialis* in the rocky mountains of central Mali. Breeding elsewhere in the area by *A. aequatorialis* also seems probable, given independent reports from northernmost Burkina Faso by Balança & de Visscher (1993) and B. Portier (*Bull. Afr. Bird Cl.* 2003, 10: 56, and *in litt.*). Taken with our own observations and those of Spierenburg (2000) from Mali, that all these observers have identified large numbers of *A. aequatorialis* where Thiollay (1974) alone reported many *A. melba*, means that the status of the latter species must be considered equivocal.

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